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**STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:  
*Vocabulary Results from the 2009 and 2011 NAEP Reading Assessments***

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I have been involved with the assessment of vocabulary that NAEP is reporting on today since planning for it began almost a decade ago. In 2003-2004, I was a member of the steering committee that guided development of NAEP's new reading framework. As a Governing Board member from 2004 to 2008, I served on the Assessment Development Committee that shepherded the framework to adoption and then reviewed all of the items that make up the assessment itself.

Throughout this long process I carried two strong convictions:

- First, that vocabulary is a critical part of reading comprehension. Students must know the words before they can make any sense of what they read.
- Second, that NAEP should issue a separate report on vocabulary both to highlight its importance and to give the public clear information on the vocabulary knowledge that our students have attained.

And so it really is a great pleasure to have been invited to comment on the NAEP reading vocabulary report today.

As expected, the report shows a very strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Students who do well in one do well in the other, and vice versa: Those with a limited vocabulary score poorly in reading comprehension. Clearly, sounding out the letters isn't enough. Students must know the meaning of the words in the passages they read in order to understand the passages and respond to them appropriately, which is what the full NAEP reading assessment requires.

We know from well-established research that many children come to school with pronounced gaps in exposure to language. Many are just learning English, which they do not speak at home.

For these children, the school must play the crucial role of deliberately, explicitly teaching vocabulary not through random word lists but by focusing on words that are essential to understanding a text.

The vocabulary sections of the NAEP reading assessment test vocabulary this way. They are tests of meaning in context. Through multiple-choice questions, students are asked to select the meaning of words that are key in the passages they are asked to read.

The Common Core State Standards for college and career readiness also place emphasis on vocabulary and follow the lead of NAEP in focusing on the meaning of words that are used in a text. The Common Core pays considerable attention not just to learning individual words but also to their different meanings in different contexts and to the nuances in families of words. Like NAEP, it also stresses vocabulary that is characteristic of written language and academic texts rather than everyday speech.

Behind all this interest in vocabulary there is an impressive body of research showing that vocabulary is highly predictive of reading achievement and that explicit teaching of vocabulary is particularly important for children from impoverished language backgrounds. Building a strong vocabulary and the reading skills it promotes can be an important step in breaking the cycle of poverty.

But developing a rich vocabulary can become a huge task for students. There are several hundred thousand words in popular, contemporary usage, and it is estimated that 65,000 to 75,000 words are needed to read and write well. Schools must take on this teaching task, and persist in it, beginning in the earliest grades and continuing through high school.

Not surprisingly, the NAEP results for vocabulary follow the same patterns as the main NAEP reading assessment, which is a test of reading comprehension: Asians and whites have higher average scores than blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians/Alaska Natives. Girls score higher than boys. But there is an interesting difference in the gender gap. It is much smaller in vocabulary than in reading comprehension, and by 12th grade it disappears. This may well be the result of how reading is defined and tested by NAEP as an active process between reader and text that requires students to do considerable writing to answer constructed-response questions. And writing is a skill in which girls do much better on NAEP than boys.

Constructed-response questions that require writing account for about half of the full NAEP reading assessment. By contrast, all the NAEP vocabulary questions are multiple-choice.

As the new NAEP reading assessment is repeated in future years, we will be able to see trends. From 2009 to 2011, as presented in this report, there were almost no changes. Hopefully, as states implement the Common Core and place more emphasis on teaching vocabulary, students' knowledge of vocabulary should improve. And NAEP will continue to provide its independent assessment to see whether this in fact occurs.

Thanks very much.